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A TRUE LOVE STORY

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A TRUE LOVE STORY

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Chicago Literary Club
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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

While I sympathize with the Chicago Literary Club in its desire to find, if possible, in its ranks some man who as a novelist might rank with Mason as a historian and with Thompson as a poet, and while I confess the right of the Club to experiment with its members for the purpose of discovering what ones may conceal some signal ability for finding the most of invention and the least of fact, yet I cannot but feel that it was almost an insult to a clergyman to ask him to give a specimen of "sheer fabrication" to a society composed almost wholly of members of the legal fraternity.

DAVID SWING.

CHAPTER I

THE name of Linda Mellet carries the mind far back in time and far away in space, and asks the heart to transfer itself to the banks of the Mississippi, and to the earliest days of this century. The Mellet family had left France when Louisiana was still in possession of the old nation. The fame of the great river, of its fertile banks and perennial spring, had induced some of the poets of an earlier day to call that district the "Second Eden."

Inasmuch as the term "Eden" sounded oftentimes like an exaggeration, the region was named "Louisiana" after the eighteen

monarchs who had lived and perished between 778 and 1773. Between Charles the Great and Louis Philippe there stood a long line of Louises. Distinguished among these were Louis le Débonnaire, Louis the Child, Louis the Bavarian, Louis the German, Louis the Stammerer, Louis the Simple, Louis the Sluggard, Louis the Fat, Louis the Pious, Louis the Lion, Louis the Obstinate, and Louis the Fourteenth. When France contemplated the histories and the tombs of all these illustrious children, she took away from our Southwest the name of "New Eden" and called it "Louisiana." Soon afterward a part of the west bank of the river sank under such a tremendous weight of French virtue.

The marble home of Linda Mellet escaped this submergence, but from her attic window she could see the tops of the sunken forest, and where once had stood cypress-trees a hundred feet in height were to be seen now a few green bushes growing out of the new lake which had been excavated by the awful machinery of nature. This

tract of land was eighty miles long and seventy wide, and was more than six months in sinking out of the sight of the beautiful Linda.

The parents of this girl whose history became at last a more impressive shock to the Southwest than the earthquake of New Madrid, brought to the New World great wealth as well as great taste. They erected at once a home that was in full sympathy with the architectural glory of Louis the Magnificent. The home of Linda was on a high bank on the west side of the river. On the front it reached over nine hundred feet, while in depth the structure, which assumed the shape of two L's, ran back two hundred and seventy feet. In the open court in the rear the western sun made possible all the flowers and fruits of the tropics. Governed by the kind hand of the amiable girl, this rear court was a perfect bower for all the birds of bright plumage and sweet song. So wild and untouched by man was the landscape that often when Linda, by waving her parasol, was chasing the buffaloes

from the front porch, she could hear the American nightingale singing in the fig-trees at the other end of the long hall.

The attic room to which allusion has been made was the resort and retreat of the gifted young woman only in hours when she wished to work at the musical sonnets which were rapidly giving her a local fame. Her own proper room was on the second floor, and, being fifty feet in width, ran back one hundred and thirty-two feet to the open court. A second course of marble columns graced the front of her apartment. The stone, the ironwork, the brass, the mahogany fastenings, the carvings, all came in sailing vessels from France.

The floor of Linda's chamber was carpeted with rugs which had been recaptured from a pirate's ship that had overhauled merchantmen plying between the Orient and Boston. These costly fabrics had been confiscated by Lord Bellamont in 1699, and had been purchased by an ancestor of this beautiful girl.

Her bedstead was made of mahogany,

and on this dark wood was almost endless filigree of silver. On the top of each bed-post was a globe of gold, so made that one of them told the sleeper the hour of the day, another the day of the month, another the day's lesson from the Book of Common Prayer, while the fourth played for the girl beautiful French melodies.

Before the east windows of this room lay the Mississippi, with its deep waters full of prophecy regarding a wonderful republic; before the west windows lay the savannas, where grass mingled with vine and shrub, where the dogwood excelled the magnolia in whiteness, while the magnolia excelled the dogwood in perfume.

In one of these half-forgotten years Linda ran down the marble stairs in impatient haste; for, behold! at her palace door stood François August, Vicomte de Chateaubriand. At his left hand stood a youth of noble form and of distinguished face. An air of romance seemed to breathe from his large blue eyes. He could at once have sat for the portrait of an ideal lover; but

the charms and the probable destiny of this young Frenchman were overshadowed by the amazing genius and fame of the older visitor.

After Chateaubriand had implanted a few kisses upon either cheek of the dear exile from Paris, he sat down with the family, and told them soon that he had come to the New World that in a story to be called "Atala" he might treasure up the sweet and sublime things of an Eden that must soon pass away. He brought kisses also from Madame Récamier, who was then in her twenty-fifth year, and was as wonderful in her court dresses as Chateaubriand was in the pages of his rhetoric. The great writer had just received from all civilized lands infinite thanks for his "Genius of Christianity." It had made atheism unpopular, and had made Christianity resemble closely a gallery of art, or one of those thousand-acre fields from which the people of Smyrna extract the attar of roses. Laden with unbounded fame, the eloquent thinker longed to compose a story in honor of prim-

LINDA MELLET.

itive nature. Little did this wanderer dream that the two young people now listening so intently were about to live a story many times more thrilling than that of Atala. While the prose poet of France was delineating the life of the red woman, these two white exiles from Europe were to weave a friendship too vast to be dreamed of by an Indian maiden.

CHAPTER XIII

CHATEAUBRIAND contemplated in youth the career of a priest, but he was frightened away from the pulpit by the narrowness of its literary scope. Genius of a high order does not toil well under any form of restraint. Genius does not love with orthodoxy to fix the number of gods at three: because days or nights might come in which the mind might feel that there were four potentates in the sky; and then other days or nights might sweep along in which it would seem task enough to establish firmly the existence of even one such celestial monarch.

CHAPTER XIV

IT is not a little against the charm of the sermon that its manufacturer feels under a common-law promise to make use of facts. The sermon discourages imagination in the fields of history and science, and permits it to exercise its function in only the department of theology. The sermon may describe hell as best it likes; but in speaking of Illinois, for example, it feels bound to locate the State in America, and does not feel willing to separate it many miles from Lake Michigan. Chateaubriand sighed for a general release from such galling chains,

and, in addition to the privilege of locating hell or heaven where he saw fit, he desired full permission to do what he might please with Louisiana and Atala.

Among the labor-saving devices one must reckon a certain sweet and delicious falsehood. A Marquette, in writing a history of the Indian girl Atala, would have been compelled to travel, observe, tear his clothes upon thorns, go often a day without food, swim streams, sleep in a smoky wigwam, and hear a great quantity of poor French spoken by squaws not wholly attractive in custom or costume. Creative genius uses an easier method. It goes away from the object it desires to describe. It asks distance to make dirt and beauty one. It asks only distance to make a negress and a Greek girl look alike. It goes into its attic room, and, looking far away upon the smoky hills, sees an Indian woman eating a piece of raw liver, and at once it says: "I have seen Minerva alight on the summit of Parnassus. The perfume of her divine breath reaches me. Her cheek glows with eternal

youth. Her gold girdle flashes in the sun. She has a lute in her hand. Oh, I am full of rapture! Come, my pen, and help me tell the story of the goddess and her mountain!" And at the call the pen comes. We must all thank Chateaubriand for what he has done toward lessening the quantity of labor for all literary shoulders. If you would transform a poor picture into a good one, you must step back a half-mile. If the assumed goddess looks like a squaw, you must step a league further back. High literature is fond of magnificent distances.

CHAPTER XX

AFTER a night of refreshing sleep Chateaubriand began to compose some fresh literature. Linda repaired to a bower in the courtyard, and to some songs of her own composing played an accompaniment upon a harp. Sappho herself could not have been more beautiful nor have caroled more pleasing melodies. The morning hour, the happiness of the birds, the glitter of dewdrops, the perfume of blossoms, the presence of the greatest intellect of France, and the flood of romantic life that flowed in the young girl's heart, combined to make the

soul regret that the name of Eden had been taken away from the vale of this new France. In any court of Europe Linda would have been exceptional in beauty, but her face and form became almost angelic when they thus found a setting among the most wonderful and exquisite beauties from the hand of Omnipotence.

When Chateaubriand had composed a few pages, he strolled into the court, and, sitting upon a marble bench over which Linda had thrown the robe of an American lion, read a group of magnificent words that gave a picture of the scene which was about to surround the Indian girl Atala as it now surrounded the noble Linda. As the genius read, the air became clouded with green and red and yellow parrots. The groans of the river, evoked by its sad efforts to roll uprooted forests down to the Gulf; the sighing of the trees which the waves were undermining; the dancing of a thousand rainbows that were made by unseen cataracts; the whispering of the bridges which the vines had formed from tree to

tree, joining the pine to the top of the poplar, and the poplar to the top of the hollyhock, over which entangled vines the wild rose and clematis were running in joyful haste that they might make of the suspension-bridges an interminable garland of flowers; the eagles, the water-fowl, the red flamingos, the large and small herons, the flashing humming-birds; the wild bear, intoxicated by eating too many wild grapes; the black and the gray squirrel, the majestic buffalo,— all united to make Linda's heart swell with emotion and with thankfulness that her days were passing in so blessed a land! Overcome with emotion, she sang a low, sweet song. Chateaubriand bestowed upon the girl's lips another kiss which he had brought from Madame Récamier, and arm in arm they passed from the bower to a well-stocked sideboard that had done perpetual duty for Louis XIV.

CHAPTER XXV

TRAVELING merchants, such as sell books and lightning-rods in the homes of the common people, are first taught to recite a brief address. This oration is composed for the man or woman by the person who publishes the books or owns the factory. On entering a peaceful home, he considers the head of the family to be an adequate audience and begins at once to recite his part of the play. His function, intellectually, is only that of a poll-parrot. It has not been long since one of the members of this industrial family entered my own home

at the cross-roads, and discoursed as follows:

"Of all writers, none except Job equaled Shakspere. Shakspere should lie open in presence of the young. This book holds the mirror up to nature. The young are captivated by its sentiment, while the old are sustained and comforted by its wisdom. A home without a well-edited and well-illustrated Shakspere is as sad as a home without a mother. Here, sir, is 'The Family Shakspere.' Here you see a steel-engraving of the soldiers carrying away the *core* of Ophelia." "Do you not mean the corpse of Ophelia?" I said. He said that in the cities and centers of light the word used indeed to be pronounced corpse, but that *core* was now the pronunciation adopted by the persons of most advanced culture.

Chateaubriand saw the air all colored with clouds of gaudy parrots. Similar men of genius say that at the dawn of this century those beautiful birds were working their way to the Ohio, and had begun to chatter on the line stretched by Mason and Dixon.

What became of those clouds of parrots? Their story is short but sad. Coming to the Ohio, and seeing the advancing line of book-agents, they all turned back.

CHAPTER IX

LET us now return to Linda. With hair falling negligently upon white shoulders, with eyes full not only of beauty but of soul, she asked the mighty exile if he actually had ever seen a bear that had been rendered an inebriate by eating grapes! "I was taught that fruit contained no intoxicating principle until its juice had passed through the process of fermentation. Did not digestion make wine impossible?"

Chateaubriand then kissed Linda, and said: "Ah, my dear child, there is a new literature coming which deals only in im-

Impressionism à la Récamier.

pressions. It is called the Impressionist school. If I see a bear among grape-vines in autumn, if he wabbles and rolls around a little as he advances or retreats, if I am under the impression that the bear is drunk, my impression is of much more value than a fact. So in my notes on Niagara Falls I am to describe that cataract. I shall use the following language: 'Eagles, carried along by the current of air, are whirled down to the bottom of the gulf; and carcajous, hanging by their flexible tails to the ends of the bending branches, wait to snatch from the abyss the crushed bodies of bears and elks!' Now, Linda, no man of true artistic feeling can inquire whether the air over the cataract does suck eagles down. Have I an impression that such a suction would add power to my page, then down must go the eagles into the abyss, because the impressions of a sensitive, gifted soul are far better than many eagles. Nor need I remember that the carcajou has a tail too short to be wrapped around a limb, and that the animal might watch a whole century before

a mangled elk would pass under his dangling head. I was under the impression that the falls were much enhanced by the picture of that living denizen of the woods watching for the bodies of those slain by the awful power of the watery avalanche."

Linda bowed before the greater genius, and sat in silent and almost solemn admiration.

CHAPTER XXX

AT this point the young Frenchman joins the company, and from this date he changes the color of the whole picture and the destiny of Linda. We must soon add great misfortune to great beauty.

And now the youth, who had been eclipsed by the presence of the great man of letters, begins to assume a captivating part in this story of human and Western affection. He and Linda often, while walking, were accustomed to fall a few steps behind the famous poetical essayist; and while the eloquent tongue was discoursing about the

wars of the red man, or the cedars of Lebanon, or the tombs of the Orient, the listening children would press each other's hands gently and exchange a few kisses that had nothing to do with Madame Récamier. If, at intervals, the famous Chateaubriand paused that the audience might draw nearer the speaker, soon some vine crossing the path would impede Linda's foot, and while the vine was being disentangled from skirt and foot there was more touching of hand to hand and more mysterious reading of happy eyes. Each step in the primeval forest was a step in love. Each bird-song became a love-song; and when the thrush poured out a heart full of melody, the charming Linda would look up toward the songster, and whisper out: "Oh, sweet bird, those are my sentiments!" Silent kisses followed, and in the mean while Chateaubriand would discourse about the brook Kedron and the Vale of Sorrows.

These scenes came before any steam palaces had begun to move on sea or river.

Linda went to New Orleans and back in an elegant barge. It floated down with the current. It was pushed back by poles, or was drawn by a line held by slaves who walked slowly on the shore. In this barge was a complete home. Bedchambers, library, parlor, dining-room, kitchen, wine-room were under the roof. The carpets, the tapestry, the pictures, the piano, the harp, joined in one rich scenic effect. The roof of the barge was flat, and, being covered with sheet-lead, it held rich earth, and was made to hold up a most beautiful garden. The orange-tree was in perpetual bloom. Twining roses ran along the railing around the edge of the barge. The morning-glory made the dew-drops more brilliant. Birds lived in this traveling bower, and got their food from the hand of the girl whom all that lived could but love. A few girl slaves, dressed in brilliant colors, dipped up water from the great river and cared tenderly for the fruit that was ripening, and the rose that was bursting with color and perfume.

On the 10th of June, 18—, the Mellet fam-

ily and the two guests went down into this barge, and soon were out in the gentle current. When one is in a floating paradise why should one wish to go fast? Slowly moved the barge on a journey which to the idolized Linda was to bring no return. Her heart passed into a long period of cloud.

N.B. This story is a serial, and will be read in sections until the Club may seem satisfied.

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